

**5 Easter
May 2, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In the reading from John's gospel this morning we heard:

"I am the vine, you are the branches ..." (John 15:5)

In a way, this is a metaphorical reference to the agricultural practice of grafting fruit bearing vines, to hearty rootstock. Even in Jesus' time, grape vines were usually grafted. Some grape varieties had strong roots that were resistant to disease, and rot, and drought ... but they did not produce an abundance of good grapes. So, vineyard owners would graft high producing varieties of grapevines to strong root stocks.

Grafting is a relatively easy process of making a slit with a knife in the rootstock, then sticking a small branch of the producing vine in the slit. After a few weeks they become as if they are one plant.

Grafting is the same thing they do to citrus trees here in Florida. If you haven't noticed just take a look at the orange, lemon, tangerine, and grapefruit trees that they sell at Home Depot or Lowes or any local nursery. At the base of the tree you will find a thick trunk, then a thinner trunk bends out of the rootstock ... that is the grafted part and from its trunk are growing the branches. Some exotic varieties of grafted citrus trees have multiple grafts and produce lemons, oranges, and tangerines all on the same tree.

"I am the vine, you are the branches ..."

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a bishop in the Diocese of Virginia who planted apple trees in the churchyard of almost every congregation in the Diocese. When he visited each church to confirm new Episcopalians he would take them out to the apple tree and make a cut on a branch of the tree and graft in a sprig from a tree that was growing at his home. It was an object lesson about being grafted into this expression of the Christian faith ... and it was very effective.

However, the story I heard ... more than once ... was about the church who called a new rector from a large city in the Northeast. His office overlooked a small stream that flowed next to the church, but his view was blocked by a tree growing just outside his window, so he cut it down. I don't think I need to finish the story ...

For this fifth Sunday of Easter, the lectionary also gives us the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. I believe that it is a story where the metaphor of a vine and branches is very appropriate. It is a story about the inclusion of someone, who by many of the standards of the day, might well have been excluded. And, in his Spirit-led encounter with the Ethiopian official, Philip learned that the resurrection of Jesus changed everything ... everything Phillip knew about insiders and outsiders, piety and depravity, identity and belonging. The eunuch isn't the only person in the story who undergoes a conversion ... the Spirit leads Philip to experience a conversion as well.

The story begins with "the angel of the Lord" directing Philip to a certain "wilderness road" that leads away from Jerusalem. There, on the geographical margins, Philip finds the Ethiopian eunuch, a man who occupies many margins himself. He was a man interested enough in Israel's God to make a pilgrimage from Ethiopia to Jerusalem, but according to Jewish law, he was not free to practice his faith in the Temple. He was a foreigner, a black-skinned man from Africa. He was a man of rank and privilege, a royal official in charge of his queen's treasury. He was wealthy enough to possess a scroll of Isaiah, and literate enough to read it, but he lacked the knowledge, context, and experience to understand what he was reading.

However, the Ethiopian eunuch was also a powerless outsider. He was a eunuch ... a castrated male ... and therefore, by Jewish purity laws, he would not have been accepted into the community, or much of the community's common life. He was someone who didn't fit into the social and sexual paradigms of his time and place. In other words, the unnamed eunuch occupied an in-between space ... a liminal space ... a space of reversal and surprise that stubbornly resists our tidy categories of belonging and non-belonging.

What kind of person, after all, earnestly seeks after a God whose laws prohibit his bodily presence in the Temple? What kind of wealthy, high-ranking official humbly asks a stranger on the road for help with his spiritual life? What kind of long-rejected religious outcast sees a body of water and stops in his tracks because he recognizes first ... before Philip, the supposed Christian "expert" ... that God is issuing him a gorgeous, unconditional, and irresistible invitation?

I believe Philip's heroism and leadership is understated in the New Testament. He was an amazing man of deep faith and great courage. He not only baptized those whose race and religion were problems for the gatekeepers of "right-religion" in Jerusalem such as Samaritans, but now he welcomed into the Christian sect of Judaism a man whose sexuality was a problem for the Temple elite.

Remember that the Book of the Acts of the Apostles describes events that were happening in the infancy of what we now call the Christian Church. At that time these followers of the resurrected Jesus were just a sect of Judaism. Today, we know baptism

as a Christian ritual. However, the act of baptism actually predates Christianity ... remember Jesus was Jewish, and he was baptized by John in the Jordan River.

With that in mind the Ethiopian felt he had found a way into the community of faith of this new sect of Judaism ... which he loved. Therefore, the question that pops out of the Ethiopian's mouth was an honest one. "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

"What is to prevent me?" What is to prevent us from belonging to the family of God? What is to prevent us from being welcomed as Christ's own? What is to prevent us from full participation in the risen life and community of Jesus? What is to prevent us from breaking down the entrenched barriers, fences, walls, and obstacles that have kept us at an agonizing arm's length from the God we yearn for? What is to prevent us from becoming, not merely a hearer of the Good News, but an integral part of the Good News of resurrection?

For me, this is a stunning post-Easter story. If only we ... the Church ... could find our way into this "new normal" of a Resurrection faith with its expansive sense of belonging. For me, this is one of those stories that may never have actually happened, yet tells us great truth about the "new normal" of our Resurrection faith. It isn't just a story about the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. It is also the story of the conversion of Phillip ... and therefore the entire post-resurrection faith community of Jews on their way to becoming what we now call Christians.

But, this was in that liminal time ... those first few years after the death of Jesus, and the story of his resurrection ... and the formation of an institution called the Christian Church. An institution has institutional needs ... who is "in." and who is "out" ... who has access to the benefits of the community, and who is to be denied those benefits. Could this story about Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch be trying to tell us what our community of faith could really be like in the "new normal" of a Resurrected life?

How many barriers has the Church erected around the font, the communion table, the altar, the office? How often has the church ... consciously or unconsciously ... communicated the message that those who don't look, think, worship, live, speak, work, love, and practice like us do not and cannot belong? How many times has the Spirit invited us to a "wilderness road" of faith for an encounter that might convert us to an authentic post-resurrection spirit of radical hospitality ... only to have us resist and turn away?

Philip responds to the Ethiopian's query with bold action. Philip had proclaimed the good news of Jesus. Now, he makes a witness to his words: He baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. And with that, the Ethiopian eunuch "went on his way rejoicing" for at last he had become a full member of the household of faith. He had been grafted into the rootstock of the Resurrection community.

"I am the vine, you are the branches ..."

I think that this story from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles speaks loudly to the Church as it struggles to witness the good news to the world around us. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, how do we, as a congregation and as a larger church community, make room for those who are often marginalized?

You see, I believe the most important question before us is not about sexuality. It is about witness. It is about the question "What witness will we make?"

Our witness is the public affirmation of our faith. It is how we let the world see that we practice what we preach. This is our opportunity to be what we say we are. We witness to what we believe. We believe in the Bible. We believe in the Good News. And we believe in taking seriously what Jesus took seriously.

In fact, we believe so strongly in all of these essential parts of our shared faith that we are not afraid to disagree with one another about what they mean to us. We welcome difference as the active presence of God's Spirit moving amongst us. Our witness is not to conformity, but rather to community. As a community of faith that welcomes diversity we are not concerned that everyone in the sanctuary believes exactly the same thing, in the same way, at the same time. Instead, we are concerned that no one is left out of this sacred space because of what they believe ... or who they are ... or where they come from.

Our witness is to the unconditional love of God. There are no gate-keepers at the doors of this church. As we proclaim in our Baptismal Covenant "we respect the dignity of every human being," and are never ashamed of who sits next to us in worship. We are all the children of God.

We believe that God is at work in the world. We are not concerned that this world sees us as perfect, pure, or powerful. Instead, we are concerned that people see us practicing justice, doing mercy, and walking humbly with the God we believe loves us all equally.

Philip proclaimed the good news of Jesus to those of different race, religion, nationality, and even sexuality. He proclaimed the good news of Jesus. And then he included all in that proclamation by boldly witnessing to faith. May we ... the people of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church in the historic neighborhood of Lincolnville in the nation's oldest city have the courage to do the same.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is about including someone who would otherwise be excluded. The Church and our society are struggling with that same issue today. We ...

in this particular community of faith ... proclaim God's unconditional love, and God's unconditional love includes everyone, and it excludes no one.

"I am the vine, you are the branches."

Amen.